

# USING YOUR CREMATION TOOLKIT IN A 21ST CENTURY WORLD

by Michael Devaney



knowledge that cremation has grown tremendously in the past several years (doubling in the last fifteen years) and will continue to grow for the foreseeable future.

According to the Cremation Association of North America (CANA), by 2019 two out of four Americans will choose cremation for their loved ones, as well as three out of four Canadians. What is this telling us? Cremation is the new tradition. While we can sit back and lament that fact, the reality is we need to use every tool possible to continue our tradition of serving families when they call upon us. The notion of equating cremation with “less” service must be eliminated from our mindset.

Although the method of final disposition may change, that does not mean the needs and desires of families to give meaning and respect to their loved ones suddenly has shifted to a strict utilitarian style sans service, personalization or any form of remembrance. In fact the opposite is the real truth. Cremation actually allows for a wider range of memorial options. Families still want ritual to remember their loved ones. It may not be the “traditional” ritual we have been accustomed to for several generations. But unless we embrace the paradigm shift we will never fully allow the family to express what it is they really want. We will continue to only worry about lost revenue in service and products because we have convinced ourselves cremation families only want the “quickest, cheapest and least” service we can offer.

There will always be that fractionally small segment of people who truly do not desire anything other than walking in our door, giving the requisite information, signing papers and walking out without any thought other than “disposing” of the person that died. So be it.

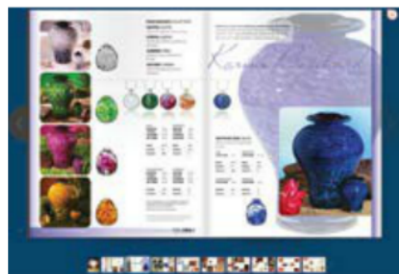
But it is our responsibility as funeral professionals in the 21st century to realize there is a much larger majority of people who embrace the idea of commemoration for their

loved ones. It is our obligation to offer them the guidance, expertise and respect they deserve.

The question becomes, how best can we accomplish the task of providing value and meaning to families. They may use the words, “we just want a cremation,” but it is up to us to provide the environment for them to define what it is they really want. Truth be told, most the time they don’t know what they want until given options. We must be inquirers, not order takers. We must first listen and then provide choices in service, product and personalization based on our open-ended conversation with the family about the life of their loved one.

Here are a few basic tools we must use for all families desiring cremation:

## 1. Cremation Merchandising does not start when the family calls upon you.



Make sure you speak to the cremation customer in everything you do. Your facility name (do you include “Cremation Services” in your name), staff communication, website and marketing messages

should all embrace the cremation family as a valued customer. Never make them feel less important.

Do you show more than just static photos of your cremation products? With improved technology it is possible to offer your complete cremation catalog in a digital “flipbook” format on your website. This gives families time to page through your cremation catalog without the pressure of needing to make an immediate buying decision. This also puts them in the frame of mind that various retail purchase options are available including urns, mementos, jewelry and other keepsake items.

## 2. Provide a tour of your facility before arrangements.

Introduce the family to your staff and show them your facility (especially if you have a crematory.) This will help them see what they will be paying for as well as imagining possibilities



for service options. Many funeral homes are now adapting traditional visitation rooms which feature rows of folding chairs facing a curtained wall with torchiere lamps to a more modern

center-focused casual environment with living room style furniture facing inward toward a memorial tribute area. This can be specifically designed to feature personal artifacts along with photo and video display. Encourage the family to display an urn holding their loved one's cremated remains as the focal point of the memorial area. If the family has selected an engraveable urn make sure to guide them as to the possibilities of creating an even more personalized engraved tribute.

Better yet, consider holding "Cremation Open Houses" for the public, providing an opportunity to educate them BEFORE the need arises. What better way to frame the experience of cremation as more than a method of final disposition, but rather an expression of life events commemorated in a personalized ritual.

**3. Make the arrangement conference an opportunity to serve.**

If a family states, "We just want a cremation", create an atmosphere of communication. Ask open-ended questions. "Have you thought about what type of cremation service you would prefer?" If their answer is "direct cremation", ask them "Can you help me understand what you mean by a direct cremation?" They may think this is the only option. Never assume they know all service options available to them.

**4. Collecting the story.**

Don't just be vital statistics collectors. Avoid asking only yes or no questions. Learn as much as you can about their loved one. It is very difficult to make suggestions or offer valuable assistance in planning a customized service experience when you do not know anything about the deceased or their family.

Even if you are meeting with a family that has expressed a strong desire for a cremation without viewing or services, it is important to collect their story. Take time to listen to what they feel is important about the life of their loved one. Use phrases like, "I unfortunately did not have the privilege of knowing your mother, so I would like to spend a little bit of time getting to know her better through you... this will help me to make suggestions as we proceed. Is this all right?"

**5. Reflect back to the family what they say about their loved one.**

Often it is this time with a family that helps them to understand and see the need for a specific type of a personalized cremation product, ceremony, or some other sort of remembrance service of a life well lived. You never know how this may help them focus in on what was truly meaningful about their loved one. You may need to tell the family, "We will only have the opportunity to arrange

services for your wife one time...I want to make sure that we do everything exactly as you desire...and that we do not look back in a week, a month or years later and wish we had done things differently."

The last thing you ever want to hear from a family is, "I never thought of that and the funeral director did not mention it."

**6. You are the expert - provide answers.**

Families look to you as the expert. Use this time not only to listen, but to make suggestions based on their insights about their loved one. Providing answers does not mean telling families "what they want," but rather helping them understand the many options that are available and suggesting ways in which they may fulfill their needs.

**7. Use audio-visual tools.**



It is always helpful to use short, informational videos during the arrangement conference to help families understand available service options, as well as decisions regarding final placement of cremated remains. Having these videos on your website can also be

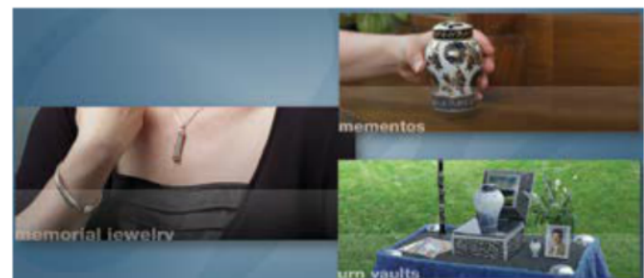
extremely helpful for families to view BEFORE the time of need. They will have more confidence in knowing what to expect from your funeral home.

**8. Present your cremation services in a personalized format.**



Once the family knows the type of service they want, it is helpful to offer them a group of cremation service packages in a customized printed booklet that has simple, easy-to-understand bullet points and visual photo references that help communicate different types of services. This should be separate from the lengthy worded General Price List.

**9. Make sure you have a full line of cremation products displayed in an attractive setting, yet geared towards the retail selling environment.**



Product merchandising theory can take up an entire article or classroom course. Suffice it to say -cremation

products are not there just to look nice on your display. They are there to SELL. "If you don't have the right display, don't expect to sell the products." Make sure you are offering variety in color, material, function, eye appeal and price in an attractive, well-lit retail display environment.

Don't just display urns on a wall, but show the relationship of how mementos, jewelry, keepsakes, urn vaults and other accessories can add value to the overall purchase decision. Do not assume families know these are available if you don't feature them.

**10. Are you doing everything you can to meet the changing needs of your families, especially those choosing cremation?**

Always look for ways to do more for your cremation families. You are not promoting cremation per se, but rather promoting service and value. Cremation will be at your doorstep no matter what you do. So why not be

proactive and add value in everything you do? Family preferences may have changed, but your business model of service should not.

The 21st century funeral professional will need to be alert to on-going changes in family preferences toward memorialization. We must also be flexible enough to offer multiple options in products and services while maintaining our commitment to serve the family with respect and dignity. It is only then that we will continue to be successful business enterprises.

If not, families will not see the value you bring. They will quickly find other alternatives, as loyalty to your business (just because you may have been around the longest) is waning in today's transitory, internet world. Or worse, they could become part of that small minority that only view funeral professionals as a conduit for body disposal. Time is running out for all of us as funeral professionals to choose the right path. **FBA**



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